CLAIMS

1. A method of printing an image onto a 3-dimensional surface, the method comprising:-

heating a transfer element having an image printed thereon to make the transfer element more flexible;

applying the heated transfer element to a 3-dimensional surface having a protective coating thereon, with substantially uniform pressure across the area of contact between the transfer element and the surface, such that the image faces the surface; and

heating the transfer element to at least partially transfer the image into the protective coating.

2. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of applying said protective coating.

3. A method according to claim 2, further comprising the step of applying a receptor coating prior to application of said protective coating.

4. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, further comprising the step of printing an image onto said transfer element.

5. A method according to claim 4, wherein the image is printed by means of a digital printer.

6. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the transfer element is applied to the surface by means of vacuum forming.

7. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the transfer element is at least partially heated by means of hot gas.

8. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, further comprising the step of applying a thermally conductive film to the transfer element.

9. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, further comprising the step of removing solvent and/or moisture from a region adjacent said transfer element during heating thereof.

10. A method of printing an image onto a 3-dimensional surface, the method substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

11. An apparatus for printing an image onto a 3-dimensional surface, the apparatus comprising:-

fixing means for fixing a transfer element, having an image printed thereon, in position relative to a 3-dimensional surface on which an image is to be printed and having a protective coating applied thereto;

heating means for heating the transfer element to make it more flexible and to at least partially transfer the image into the protective coating; and

application means for applying the flexible transfer element to the surface with substantially uniform pressure across the area of contact between the transfer element and the surface such that the image faces the surface.

12. An apparatus according to claim 11, wherein the fixing means comprises at least one recess for receiving at least one part having a respective 3-dimensional surface, and for fixing a respective transfer element relative to the or each said part.

13. An apparatus according to claim 12, wherein the recess is at least partially removable from a housing of the apparatus, and the fixing means is adapted to fix the transfer element in response to insertion of the recess into the housing.

14. An apparatus according to claim 13, further comprising further fixing means for holding the or each said recess in position in the housing.

15. An apparatus according to claim 13 or 14, further comprising control means for actuating the heating means and/or the application means in response to insertion of the recess into the housing.

16. An apparatus according to any one of claims 11 to 15, wherein the heating means is adapted to direct hot gas towards the surface.

17. An apparatus according to any one of claims 11 to 16, further comprising moisture and/or solvent removing means for removing solvent and/or moisture from a region adjacent the transfer element.

18. An apparatus according to any one of claims 11 to 17, wherein the application means comprises vacuum forming means.

19. An apparatus for printing an image onto a 3-dimensional surface, the apparatus substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

20. A transfer element adapted to have an image printed thereon, the transfer element comprising:-

a carrier layer adapted to be heated to make the carrier layer more flexible;

an image supporting layer; and

a thermally conducting layer.

21. A transfer element adapted to have an image printed thereon, the transfer element substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawings.